



news - Group tries to stop mine exploration because of drinking water issues - Vernal Express

Carol Russell to: Darcy Campbell

Cc: Johanna Miller

09/05/2012 12:01 PM

Group tries to stop mine exploration

Mary Bernard, Vernal Express

A proposed seismic study by the Utah Phosphate Company, a subsidiary of Agrium, threatens the Ashley Valley's primary aquifer, said a valley-wide coalition of concerned citizens.

People from the Uintah Water Source Protection Coalition argue the impact of drilling holes and setting off explosive charges could cause irreparable damage to water resources.

Problem is, the state may have no alternative but to approve UPC's exploratory permit for seismic testing

Dana Dean, associate director of mining for the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining, explained the state's position on Friday, Aug. 31 at an informal meeting in Duchesne.

"We issue permits as long as the operator meets the rules and statute the Division must grant the permit," she said.

There is no leeway for the agency to stop a project for any other reason than they are not following the law.

DOGM officials will make a decision by Wednesday or Thursday this week.

Once decided — there is only appeal.

Coalition organizer Loran Hills presented DOGM officials with a sheaf of paper with hundreds of signatures opposing the seismic exploration.

UPC proposes to mine phosphate on State School Institutional and Trust Lands Administration property near the Ashley Springs

“The law says (DOGM) must grant a permit, but you don’t have a law that says we have to protect a primary water source for an entire community?” asked Hills.

It’s simple, says Hills, the state of Utah should never issue potential mining permits in localities that threaten drinking water.

Frustrated, she has been directed between SITLA and DOGM officials each pointing to the other as the decision-maker.

“Why are we having to fight our state?” she asked.

Exploratory testing could drill 25 holes to a depth of up to 150 feet to be packed with charges, according to the permit request.

“The holes are packed with 2.2 pounds of explosive; a 1 inch per second blast cone, or a very small vibration like that of a very large man walking across the floor,” Leslie Heppler, DOGM minerals program engineer.

Low impact seismic testing or not, Hills contends the state agency should be working with residents to resolve the issue rather than moving forward with blasting.

Likewise, such initiatives to drill in the Ashley Valley should be tempered with concern for the communities stated Ken Bassett, Vernal City manager.

The Ashley Springs aquifer serves “90 to 95 percent in four different water districts: Vernal City, Ashley Valley, Maeser and Jensen, representing all the people in the Ashley Valley,” he said.

Nearly 18,000 people depend on the springs he noted, adding the undefined potential for impact means no testing should occur.

Uintah County’s water users along with the Utah State University have undertaken a science-based analysis of the aquifer to determine the nature and sensitivity of the underground formation.

Commissioners stated asked DOGM officials to delay the permit decision until they determine how long it will take to conduct the studies.

Two options remain available for the county say commissioners, including developed a local ordinance to protect water resources or a land exchange.

“We have an ongoing concern in this area, we are working a land exchange with SITLA,” said commission chair Darlene Burns.

Either way, these options take time. Should DOGM approve the exploratory permit for UPC the coalition has 10 days in which to file an appeal.

*Carol Russell*

Carol Russell  
U.S. EPA Region 8 - EPR-EP  
1595 Wynkoop  
Denver, CO 80202

303-312-6310  
russell.carol@epa.gov

